



[Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919](#)

Reform or Revolution?

Rosa Luxemburg's "[Reform or Revolution?](#)" (attached) is a great classic. In the first place it is a thorough polemical rejection of Eduard Bernstein's 1899 "[Evolutionary Socialism](#)", which book Luxemburg deals with comprehensively, to the point where she concludes:

"It was enough for opportunism to speak out to prove it had nothing to say. In the history of our party that is the only importance of Bernstein's book."

This was true. The reformists have never made any advance on Bernstein. But they keep coming.

"Reform or Revolution?" at once became the beginning of an

even more crucial polemic, this time between Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, which generated further “classics”, and which we will follow again in this week’s part of our course on the classics.

Luxemburg demolishes Bernstein, but then contradicts Lenin and is in turn corrected by Lenin’s final reply. In the process of these two successive polemics (first Bernstein *versus* Luxemburg and Lenin, then Luxemburg *versus* Lenin), the modern communist parties were defined sharply for the first time, and irreversibly differentiated from the reformists, and from the reformist mass organisations such as trade unions.

Lenin published “[What is to be Done?](#)” in 1902, in response to the same book of Eduard Bernstein’s and the consequent outbreak of “economism”, also called “opportunism”, or “reformism”, or “syndicalism”, (or in South Africa, “workerism”). Lenin went further than Luxemburg. Lenin’s “What is to be Done?” is regarded as the defining blueprint of the communist parties as they are now. The communist parties have no compromise with reformism.

By 1919 the Communist International (also called Third International, or Comintern) had been formed and by 1921 the CPSA (now SACP) had been admitted to it as a recognised Communist Party.

Some other notable events of this period include the founding Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP) in Minsk in 1898. Lenin was a member, and was the

editor of the journal “*Iskra*”, which he founded in 1900.

The German Social Democrats were the most numerous, well-established and long-standing of the supposedly revolutionary parties at the time. Rosa Luxemburg, though originally Polish, was a senior member of the German party.

In 1903 the Second Congress of the RSDLP took place in Brussels and London. The consequence was the split between the Bolshevik majority and the Menshevik minority, in the course of which the Mensheviks blackmailed the majority and consequently got away with most of the spoils, including the magazine “*Iskra*”. Hence Lenin’s detailed 1904 report of this Congress is called “[One Step Forward, Two Steps Back](#)”. It is this document that prompted Rosa Luxemburg to raise objections in the form of her 1904 work known as “[Leninism or Marxism?](#)”

[Lenin’s reply](#) (1904) to Rosa Luxemburg was conclusive. It settled all the open questions.

In 1905 a revolution broke out in Russia, which resolved into a bourgeois-democratic advance and the establishment of the “Duma” (parliament) in Russia. The RSDLP held its Third Congress in that year, and Lenin wrote “[Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution](#)”, a full differentiation of the revolutionaries from the reformists, which we will come to.

In 1914 at the outbreak of war between the main Imperialist

powers most of the Social-Democrats of the Second International, including the German Social-Democrats led by Karl Kautsky, abandoned their internationalism and sided with their separate bourgeois ruling classes. The RSDLP held out against this collapse, while Luxemburg founded the anti-war [Spartacist League](#) in Germany. In February, 1917 a second bourgeois revolution in Russia overthrew the Tsar, and in October the Great October (proletarian) revolution was successfully carried out under Lenin's leadership.

In January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg was murdered in Berlin by the proto-fascist "Freikorps" organisation.

The attached document, also linked below, is a redacted (shortened) version of "Reform or Revolution?" prepared for discussion purposes. Two more points can usefully be picked out at this stage. The first is the direct statement of the matter at issue in the opening lines of Luxemburg's Introduction:

'Can the Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not... It is in Eduard Bernstein's theory... that we find, for the first time, the opposition of the two factors of the labour movement. His theory tends to counsel us to renounce the social transformation, the final goal of Social-Democracy and, inversely, to make of social reforms, the means of the class struggle, its aim... But since the final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the Social-Democratic

movement from bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois radicalism, the only factor transforming the entire labour movement from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle against this order, for the suppression of this order—the question: "Reform or Revolution?" as it is posed by Bernstein, equals for the Social-Democracy the question: "To be or not to be?"

The second comes within the text where Luxemburg describes the “[Sisyphus](#)”-like situation of the small enterprises under monopoly capitalism, so typical of South Africa today, as follows:

*“The struggle of the average size enterprise against big Capital... should be rather regarded as a periodic **mowing down** of the small enterprises, which rapidly grow up again, only to be mowed down once more by large industry.”*

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Reform or Revolution?, Rosa Luxemburg, 1900.](#)
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